

# Wheeler-Kohn House

2018 S. Calumet Ave.

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Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks on December 3, 1997



CITY OF CHICAGO  
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development  
Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner

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*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks.*

*The designation process begins with a staff study—summarized in this report—discussing the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark. The next step is a preliminary vote by the Commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until the landmark recommendation is acted upon.*

*This Preliminary Summary of Information is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the designation ordinance recommended to City Council should be regarded as final.*

**Cover: Drawing of the steps and ornate covered porch.**

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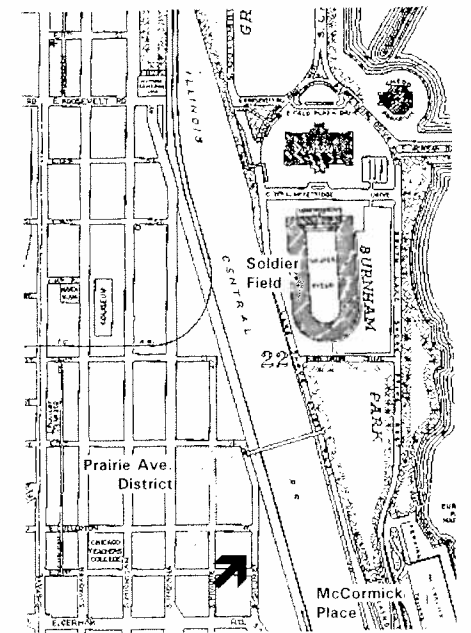
2018 S. Calumet Ave.

Built: 1870  
Architect: Otis L. Wheelock  
Remodeled: c.1880s

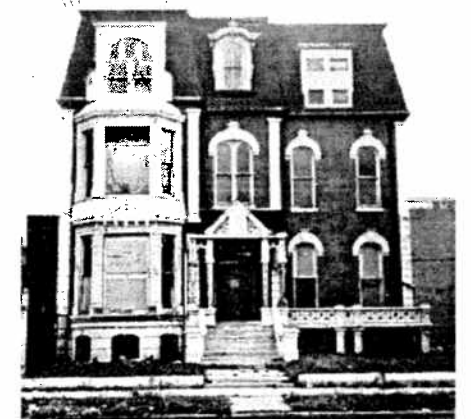
The Wheeler-Kohn House is one of the last and finest survivors of the stately mansions built prior to the Fire of 1871 on Chicago's Near South Side. This handsome residence was among the earliest constructed in the South Prairie Avenue neighborhood, home to Chicago's early mercantile and industrial barons and Chicago's first "Gold Coast" during the last quarter of the 19th century.

The Wheeler-Kohn House is one of the best examples of Second Empire architecture in Chicago, a once-popular but now scarce architectural style. Inspired by French architecture of the 19th century, the ornate styling of the house reflected the flamboyant attitudes of Chicago's early business elite.

The architect of the Wheeler-Kohn House was Otis L. Wheelock, an important and well-known early architect in Chicago. Although primarily known for his commercial work, this is one of only two known houses by Wheelock still remaining.



The Wheeler-Kohn House is located southwest of Soldier Field, between the Prairie Avenue District and McCormick Place (above); the Wheeler-Kohn House, as it appears today (below).





Older houses were often "updated" in the 1880s-90s to remain fashionable. This ornate covered porch was added to the Wheeler-Kohn House in the 1880s.

The Wheeler-Kohn House also demonstrates a trend in the 1880s and '90s when it was fashionable for property owners to "update" or remodel their residences. Originally built in a more austere variation of the Second Empire style by Calvin Wheeler, the house was sold to Joseph Kohn in 1874. Kohn later altered the house, most likely in the mid-to-late 1880s, adding an ornate bay and a more decorative porch to meet changing tastes and architectural trends.

Although the Wheeler-Kohn house has gone unnoticed for decades due to the industrial character of the surrounding neighborhood, its distinctive design and historical associations make it an important reminder of the cultural heritage of the city.

## Settlement of Chicago's Near South Side

In 1870, the South Prairie Avenue neighborhood was beginning to develop as a home for Chicago's "well-to-do" when banker Calvin Wheeler built his house on South Calumet Avenue. Mansions such as Wheeler's were built in the elite neighborhoods of the north and west sides. However, the Near South Side became the favored locale of many people, in part, because it was not separated from the Loop by the river and did not have the problem of interruptions in traffic stemming from the constant opening of the bridges. The south side also had the advantage of a streetcar network which did not cross the Chicago River to the north side.

South Wabash and Michigan avenues had been high-grade residential streets from the 1840s and '50s, but the elegance of the Clarke House, originally built at 16th Street and Prairie Avenue, helped to make Prairie and the adjoining Indiana and Calumet avenues the preferred site for upper-end houses. The ease of transportation, in the form

of the nearby Illinois Central trains and the Cottage Grove streetcar, enhanced the area's appeal.

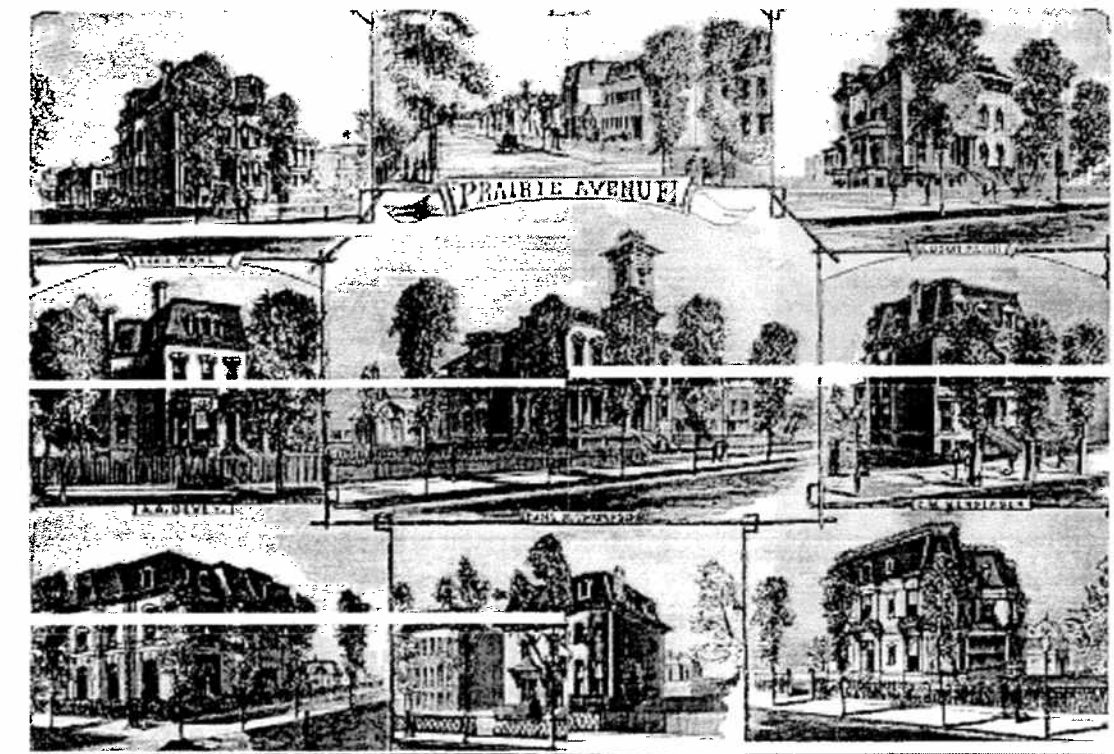
Elegant houses began to be built in the 1850s on "the avenues" between 16th Street and Cermak Road, but the 1870s saw a large increase in the number of houses being built in the area. In 1870, the year Calvin Wheeler constructed his house, grain elevator-owner Daniel Thompson built the south side's first \$100,000 house at Prairie and 20th Street, Marshall Field was just beginning the construction of his stately mansion at 1901 Prairie Avenue, and George Pullman purchased the parcel at the northeast corner of Prairie and 18th for his new house for more money than anyone had ever paid for a residential site in Chicago. Meat packer Philip Armour moved to Prairie Avenue in 1872.

In the opinion of one observer at the time, Calumet Avenue "was one of the finest residence



This row of handsome pre-Fire residences that once stood on Park Row (11th Street, east of Michigan Avenue) shows the ornate cornices and window openings that characterized residential architecture in the decade before the Fire of 1871.

Some of the elegant homes constructed along Prairie Avenue, including the homes of Daniel Thompson, Marshall Field, Edson Keith, and George Pullman (all demolished).



Chicago's first "Gold Coast" was the Prairie Avenue neighborhood on the city's Near South Side; a row of fine houses on the 1800-1900 block of Prairie Avenue (the second house on the left is the Keith House in the Prairie Avenue District), c.1906.





Calvin Wheeler (above), a banker and early president of the Board of Trade, built the Wheeler-Kohn House in 1870 but sold it four years later. Joseph Kohn (below), who owned a successful wholesale clothing business, purchased the house for his family in 1874 from Wheeler. His family remained in the house until 1908.



streets on the South Side, second only to Prairie avenue and by some considered the handsomest [sic] avenue of the two." Calumet Avenue residents, although not the mercantile and industrial giants that lived on Prairie, included executives of many of the city's top industrial and commercial companies.

Calvin Wheeler, was typical of the class of affluent professionals emerging in Chicago's growing economy in the years between the opening of the Illinois & Michigan Canal in 1848 and the Chicago Fire of 1871. He was listed in city directories as vice-president of Union National Bank and in 1862 he became president of the Chicago Board of Trade. Wheeler purchased the property on Calumet in the summer of 1870, but only lived there until 1874 when he sold the house to Joseph A. Kohn, an émigré from Germany. Kohn and his brothers established in 1864 what became a successful wholesale clothing business. Joseph Kohn died in 1903 but the family continued to live in the house until 1908.

### A Rare Survivor of Residential Architecture Before the Chicago Fire

The Wheeler-Kohn Residence is a remarkable survivor from the era when architecture took on an important role in how the city presented itself. Beginning in the 1860s, as Chicago underwent its rapid growth from a frontier outpost to a major urban center, its successful citizens reinforced their prosperity by building imposing residences.

In comparison with residences of this era, early large-scale houses were relatively plain in their character. From the 1830s through the 1860s, large houses in Chicago were rendered in the relatively simple lines of the Colonial or Greek revival styles. Such straightforward architecture

was prevalent in the east coast communities from which most Chicagoans had come.

Overall, both styles were uncomplicated in their basic form and were enhanced with large elements, such as columned porches, triangular roof pediments or rooftop cupolas. The Henry Clarke House (1836, 1855 S. Indiana Ave.) illustrates the Greek revival style and is the earliest remaining example of residential architecture built during the first era of the city's history.

Houses closer to the Loop and on the Near West Side were of brick or stone, and were usually party-wall or semi-detached houses. They displayed Italianate styling, which featured large areas of flat unadorned walls punctuated with large window openings and capped by stone lintels. The house of Dr. Abraham Groesbeck (built 1869, 1304 W. Washington Blvd.) illustrates this residential style. The Groesbeck House was also designed by Otis Wheelock, the architect of the Wheeler-Kohn House and is a Chicago Landmark.



The Groesbeck House (above), built 1869, is a rare survivor among pre-Fire houses. A Chicago Landmark, it was designed by Otis Wheelock, architect for the Wheeler-Kohn House. By the 1950s these three mansions (below) were all that remained along Calumet Avenue; today, only the Wheeler-Kohn House remains (first house from left).







Round-arched paired windows with ornamental hoods were typical of the "changing fashions" in architecture in the 1860s; above, second-story windows and a decorative pilaster from the Wheeler-Kohn House.

Houses such as this 1873 house in Savannah, Georgia, are typical of the popular Second Empire style; the Wheeler-Kohn House may have originally appeared like this house, with a projecting central bay, prior to its 1880s remodeling.



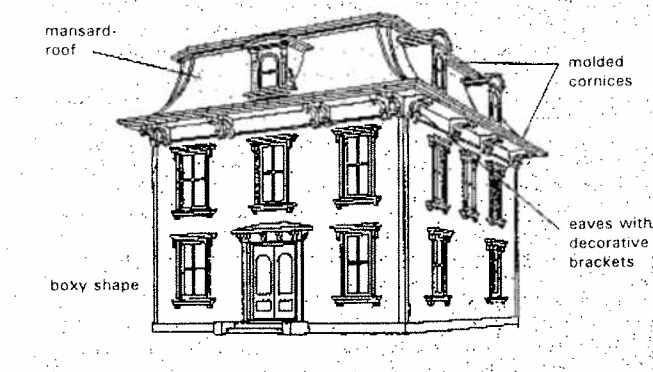
By the 1860s, more elaborate designs came in to demand. Architect Thomas Tallmadge recounted, with some bitterness, this shift in taste in his book *Architecture in Old Chicago* (1941):

As changing fashions came on apace, ceilings were heightened, windows grew high and narrow and their heads were often arched. These window heads were usually crowned with a heavy molded cap. . . . With the high basement, elaborate chimney and cupola, the last to be developed, the house of the sixties and seventies had thrown off all resemblances to its simple and dignified predecessor—hardly progenitor.

The Wheeler-Kohn House, built in 1870—a year before the Fire of 1871—represents an early romantic style of architecture from this phase of residential construction, when houses took on a decidedly more ostentatious appearance. As the city took its place on the world stage, the new affluent mercantile class began to look to London and Paris to foster its architectural tastes. Contemporary French architecture, with its elaborate ornament and the distinctive silhouette of tall mansard roofs, was particularly captivating to Chicago's elite as it was elsewhere in the United States.

## Second Empire Architecture

The Wheeler-Kohn House is an excellent representation of the Second Empire architecture style. The form developed in France from 1852 through 1870 during the reign of Louis Napoleon who established a Second Empire (Napoleon Bonaparte's was the first). It was popularized in France and the United States by important exhibitions held in Paris in 1855 and 1867. In the United States the emergence of the style coincided with the boom period following the Civil War,



The Second Empire style, the distinctive features of which are illustrated here, was based on French architecture of the 1850s through '70s. The tall mansard roof was an innovation that provided an additional living floor.

leading to the prolific construction of examples of the style.

As seen in the Wheeler-Kohn Residence, the style is distinguished by the building's overall box-like form, which is enhanced by applied ornament, such as pilasters (imitation columns) and ornate window lintels. The window openings are tall and arched. Overall the style emphasizes height and vertical proportions.

The most prominent aspect of the style was its tall mansard roof, the invention of 17th-century architect Francois Mansart. It gave a stylish finish to houses, but its height also provided a story of usable space instead of an attic. The base of the roof was typically delineated by a cornice supported by scrolled brackets.

The mansard roof became a distinctive characteristic of well-to-do houses in Chicago in



The Wheeler-Kohn House typifies the Second Empire style, with its box-like shape and mansard roof; period details include the round-top windows, decorative window hoods, pilasters, quoining, and heavy cornice with oversized brackets (later removed); the covered porch and bay window were added in the 1880s.

the 1860s. Typical was the roof of the Wheeler-Kohn House, covered with slate and separated from the lower stories by a prominent cornice supported by oversized brackets.

The Wheeler-Kohn House was in keeping with the *au courant* taste in architecture of the 1860s and '70s. As compared with older row houses and flat-front residences built closer to the downtown, houses such as the Wheeler-Kohn had a more distinctive ornamental appearance. The new style of architecture gave the city a decidedly more refined and sophisticated appearance.

### Otis L. Wheelock, Architect

The Wheeler-Kohn House is only one of two remaining residences designed by architect Otis L. Wheelock (1816-1886), one of the earliest architects in Chicago and one of its most prominent designers. Wheelock initially came to Chicago in 1839, spending a brief period here before returning to New York City where he trained in the office of Minard Lefever, whose architectural "pattern books" had a great amount of influence on 19th-century designs.

After returning to Chicago in 1856, Wheelock became associated with William Boyington (the architect of the Old Chicago Water Tower, at Michigan and Chicago avenues) on several large projects, including the buildings for the original University of Chicago near 35th and Cottage Grove Avenue.

Wheelock's own practice included a number of business blocks and elegant residences. The Delaware Building (1874, northeast corner of Dearborn and Randolph streets) and the Haskell-Barker Building (1875, 18-24 S. Wabash Ave.), both Chicago Landmarks, were designed by Wheelock with partner C.P. Thomas, and are the best known examples of Wheelock's commercial work. The Wheeler-Kohn House, along with the

Otis Wheelock was one of Chicago's earliest architects; his surviving work includes the Wheeler-Kohn House and such Chicago Landmarks as the Groesbeck House, the Delaware Building, and the Haskell-Barker Buildings.



Groesbeck House, a Chicago Landmark, are the only two residences by Wheelock still remaining.

### Updating Fashionable Houses in the 1880s

The Wheeler-Kohn is an important example of the upgrading mansions went through during the 1880s and '90s. As early Chicagoans established themselves, they built large, imposing houses. Within a decade of their construction, however, it was commonplace for owners to undertake elaborate remodelings of these houses to keep them current stylistically.

By the 1880s, the part of Chicago's Near South Side centering on Calumet and Prairie avenues, near 18th Street, was filled with the large mansions of Chicago's wealthy. Many of the residences were built anew on property where large mansions had been built a decade before. Other houses, however, were those ten- to fifteen-year-old residences which were renewed with fashionable remodelings. These upgrades were generally consistent with the original architecture, and enhanced it with the addition of bays or porches or ornamental roofs.

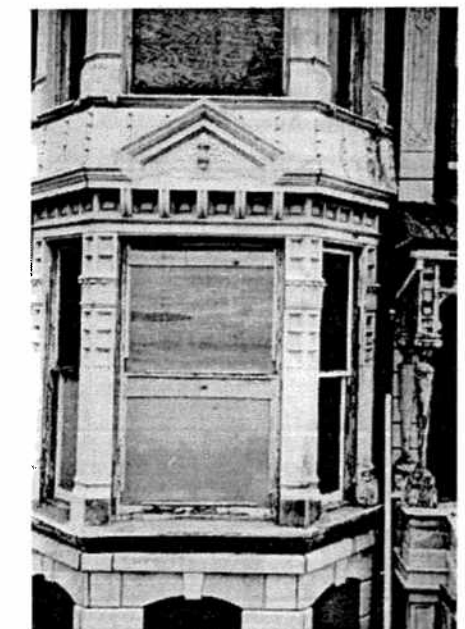
One of the remodeled Prairie Avenue dwellings, for example, includes the house still standing at 1919 S. Prairie Avenue (within the Chicago Landmark Prairie Avenue District). It was constructed in 1867 as a frame house, and underwent at least three remodelings through 1902. Another celebrated resident, Fernando Jones, who lived at 1834 S. Prairie (demolished), remodeled his simple, boxy Italianate-style house by raising its roof and adding a large roof dormer and by building large stone stairs and a canopied porch.

Sometime during the 1880s Joseph Kohn did a similar modification to the appearance of his



The Fernando Jones residence on Prairie Avenue (middle, demolished) was remodeled in the 1880s with the addition of a large roof dormer, new stone stairs and a canopied porch.

The ornately-detailed double-height bay window was added to the front of the Wheeler-Kohn House in the 1880s.



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The Wheeler-Kohn House typifies older houses which were "updated" to remain architecturally fashionable; the Wheeler-Kohn House (left) retains elements of both its original Second Empire styling and later Queen Anne remodeling.



house. The most prominent change was the addition of a two-story window bay to the front, as well as an elaborately carved front-porch canopy.

Although alterations are often considered damaging to the character of historic buildings, the changes to the Wheeler-Kohn Residence make up a large part of its significance. These early alterations to the house paralleled the wildfire growth of the city itself and reflected the ongoing desire by wealthy citizens to create an image that was both impressive and fashionable for their city and for themselves. The still-visible layering of periods and styles on the Wheeler-Kohn House can be read and interpreted like the pages of a book.

The changes to the Wheeler-Kohn House gave an effective picturesque character to the original Second Empire architecture style. The porch and bay diminished the boxy appearance of Second Empire architecture and made the house more consistent with the more elaborate character of the Queen Anne style, favored at the time.

### Industry Encroaches on the Homes of the Chicago Elite

By the early 1890s some of the houses on Prairie, Calumet and Indiana avenues, both the

By the turn-of-the-century, the Near South Side lost its desirability as a residential enclave as it was displaced by industry; below, a lone 1870s house in 1946, later demolished, is all that remains on this block of Prairie Avenue.



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remodeled ones and the new construction, were beginning to show their age and the desirability of the near South Side began to diminish. Over the next twenty years, the exclusive residential cache of the avenues was eclipsed.

At the beginning of the century, the elite residents coexisted with nearby businesses. Commercial and industrial uses had been staples of the Near South Side since the 1860s, but by the 1900s the expansion of these businesses encroached on the elegant enclave. With the mobility offered by the automobile, and the development of other elite neighborhoods such as Hyde Park and the Near North Side, families began to leave Prairie and Calumet. The Kohn family sold their house in 1908.

During the 1910s and '20s, businesses began to purchase the once-fashionable houses and either tear them down for new buildings or remodel them for commercial use. Printing became a prevalent industry in the neighborhood, especially with the construction of the R.R. Donnelley plant at Calumet Avenue and Cermak Road in 1917.

Since 1922, the Wheeler-Kohn House has been used by two commercial companies. In 1922, the house was purchased by the Wartenburg Publishing Co., a German Lutheran press, which printed books and religious tracts. The publishers built a warehouse at the rear of the property, and removed the walls between rooms on the second floor of the house, but otherwise left intact the exterior and the formal rooms downstairs. The Murphy Butter and Egg Company, which sold wholesale dairy items to restaurants, hotels, hospitals and other institutions, bought the property in 1944.

The Wheeler-Kohn House was purchased in 1997 and plans call for it to be refurbished and used as a bed-and-breakfast facility.

Fine single-family residences, once abundant on Prairie and Calumet avenues, are now the exceptions. Vacant lots and early- and mid-

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twentieth-century manufacturing plants dot the landscape. Ironically, the industrial uses that supplanted the streets' exclusivity are also responsible for the survival of this one vestige of an elegant age. The residential use planned for this almost 130-year-old house will bring its storied past full circle.

All that remains of the early residential enclave on the city's Near South Side, Chicago's first "Gold Coast," are the few remaining residential buildings in the Prairie Avenue District (pictured here in the 1960s, prior to the relocation of the Clarke House) and a handful of buildings scattered throughout the neighborhood; the Wheeler-Kohn House, just out of the picture to the right, is the best of the remaining buildings outside the Prairie Avenue District.



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## APPENDIX

### Criteria for Designation

The following criteria, as set forth in Section 2-210-620 of the Municipal Code, should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether the Wheeler-Kohn House should be recommended for landmark designation:

#### CRITERION 1

*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspects of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois or the United States.*

The Wheeler-Kohn Residence is a rare survivor of the mansions built on the Near South Side in the decades before the Chicago Fire of 1871. As Chicago underwent its rapid growth from a frontier outpost to a major urban center, its successful citizens chose to display their wealth in grandiose architecture. The ornate and elaborate treatment of the Wheeler-Kohn House is characteristic of this early tendency of property owners to emphasize their prosperity by building imposing houses.

The Wheeler-Kohn House was also one of the earliest mansions constructed in the South Prairie Avenue neighborhood, Chicago's first "Gold Coast" during the last quarter of the 19th century. From 1870 through 1910, the Near South Side (particularly along Prairie, Calumet, and Indiana avenues), was the popular residential district for Chicago's "well-to-do" citizens. The backgrounds of the first two owners of the Wheeler-Kohn House were consistent with the merchants and industrialists living in the area. Wheeler was the vice president of a downtown



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bank, and Joseph Kohn was a partner in a successful wholesale clothing company.

Early alterations to the Wheeler-Kohn House demonstrate the trend during the 1880s of wealthy property owners who remodeled their residences. As the Prairie Avenue area evolved, owners constantly updated their property, either by tearing down and building new houses or by remodeling their existing houses in a manner consistent with current architectural trends. Originally built as a stylish mansion in 1870, the Wheeler-Kohn House was altered during the 1880s to meet the changing tastes and architectural trends of the period.

#### **CRITERION 4**

*Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail or craftsmanship.*

The Wheeler-Kohn House is one of the best examples of Second Empire architecture in Chicago, few examples of which still remain. Inspired by French architecture, the ornate styling of the house reflects the flamboyant attitudes of Chicago's early mercantile and banking barons.

The style developed in France from 1852 through 1870. It was popularized by important exhibitions held in Paris in 1855 and 1867. In the United States the emergence of the style coincided with the boom period following the Civil War, leading to the prolific construction of examples of the style throughout the country.

As seen in the Wheeler-Kohn Residence, the style is distinguished by the building's overall box-like form which is enhanced by applied ornament such as pilasters (imitation columns) and ornate window lintels. The windows themselves are tall and arched.

The signature feature of the house is its tall mansard roof. Made popular by contemporary French architecture, the mansard roof became a

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distinctive characteristic of well-to-do houses in Chicago in the 1860s.

The Wheeler-Kohn House was in keeping with the *au courant* taste in architecture of the 1860s and '70s. Ornate styles such as the Second Empire gave the emerging metropolis a decidedly more refined and sophisticated appearance.

#### **CRITERION 5**

*Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

The Wheeler-Kohn House is only one of two remaining residences designed by architect Otis L. Wheelock (1816-1886), one of the earliest architects in Chicago and one of its most prominent designers. He first came to Chicago in 1839. Among the most prominent of his early works were the structures built in the 1860s for the original University of Chicago campus near 35th Street and Cottage Grove.

Wheelock's own practice included a number of business blocks and elegant residences, built before and after the Chicago Fire of 1871. Three of his buildings, the Haskell-Barker (18 and 24 S. Wabash, 1875) and the Delaware buildings (36 W. Randolph, 1872) are designated Chicago Landmarks.

### **Significant Historical or Architectural Features**

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks identifies the property's "significant features" in order for the owner and

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the public to understand which elements are most important to the significance of the landmark.

These features are also important in carrying out the Commission's permit review responsibilities to evaluate the effect of proposed alterations to "any significant historical or architectural feature" of the landmark or landmark district (as required by Section 2-120-770, 780 of the Municipal Code).

Because the primary significance for the Wheeler-Kohn House stems from its use as a residence, its period of significance dates from 1870 to 1922. The house was altered in the 1880s, but unlike most changes, these alterations are important to the understanding of the history of the residence. Any additions or alterations to the house, including the warehouse, built in 1922, at the rear of the property, are not significant features.

Based on this report's evaluation of the Wheeler-Kohn House, the recommended significant historical and architectural features of this building are: all exteriors and the roof of the original (1870) house, but not including the adjoining warehouse. The warehouse built to the rear of the Wheeler-Kohn House is considered a non-contributing structure.

## Permit Review and Rehabilitation Issues

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks bases its review of all City-issued permits related to landmark properties on its published *Guidelines for Alterations to Historic Buildings and new Construction*. The purpose of the Commission's review is to protect and enhance the significant historical and architectural features of landmarks.

The exterior of the Wheeler-Kohn House retains most of its historic design integrity. The

only significant change from the house as it appeared in the 1880s is the loss of the large bracketed cornice above the second floor and the replacement of the slate roof with an asphalt covering. In addition, the original large entry doors were stolen while the property stood vacant.

Any proposals for additions or alterations to the landmark would be reviewed to ensure that they would be compatible with the building and would not alter, obscure or demolish any significant features.

It is recommended that any building rehabilitation work should be done in accordance with the previously mentioned Commission's Guidelines, as well as the *U.S. Secretary of Interior's Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*. Rehabilitation work should be based on thorough historic documentation.

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## Acknowledgments

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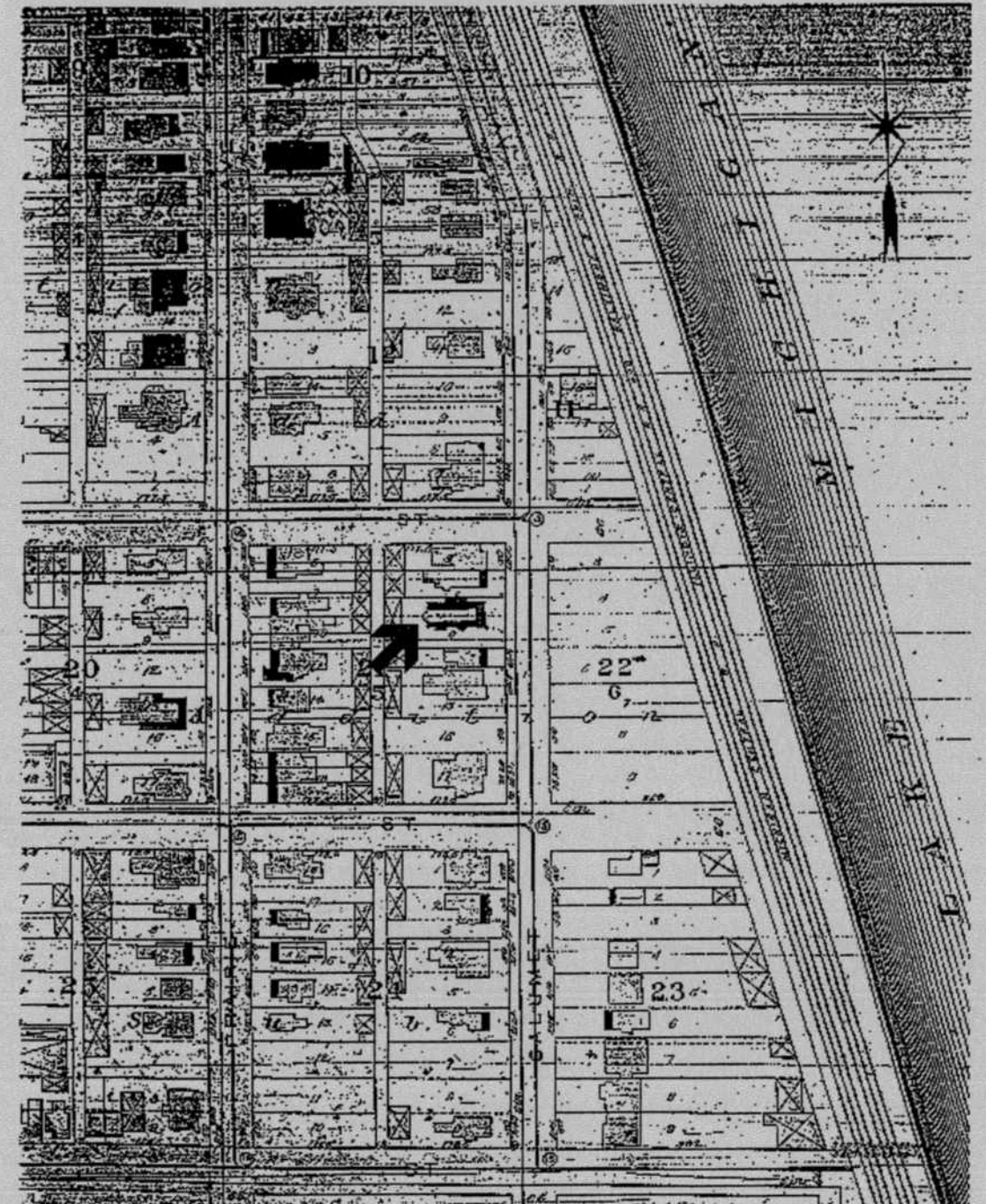
*A Field Guide to American Architecture*, pp. 6 (bottom), 7 (top).

*The Grand American Avenue, 1850-1920*, pp. 2 (bottom), 9 (top), 10 (bottom).

*Lost Chicago*, p. 3 (bottom).

Collection of Scott and Debra Seger, pp. 1 (bottom), 6 (top), 9 (bottom).

Collection of Jack Simmerling, pp. 5 (bottom), 10 (top).



This fire insurance map from 1886 shows the many large residences which once lined Prairie and Calumet avenues; the arrow shows the Wheeler-Kohn House.

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